

National Marine Sanctuaries  
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration



NATIONAL MARINE  
SANCTUARIES

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FLORIDA KEYS



# Blue Star Recognition Program

Eric Raslich

# Blue Star Overview

- Voluntary recognition program for charter boats participating in diving and snorkeling activities
- Began in Florida Keys
- Initially funded in part by a grant from Mote's Protect Our Reef Grants Program



# Context

- Began with 4 original shops
- 20 current Blue Star shops
  - Two or three at various stages in the process
- A few new shops show interest each year
  - 4 new shops on boarded in the last year

# Mission

“The mission of the Blue Star program is to promote responsible diving and snorkeling practices within the Florida Keys and to enhance visitor appreciation and understanding of the marine ecosystem and Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary (FKNMS).”

# Program Goals

- Increase the awareness and knowledge of the marine ecosystem and FKNMS among dive and snorkel operator staff;
- Connect dive and snorkel operators with the Florida Keys environmental community and conservation organizations;

# Program Goals (cont.)

- Reduce avoidable impacts of divers and snorkelers on the coral reef;
- Enhance visitor appreciation and understanding of the marine ecosystem and FKNMS.

# Eligibility

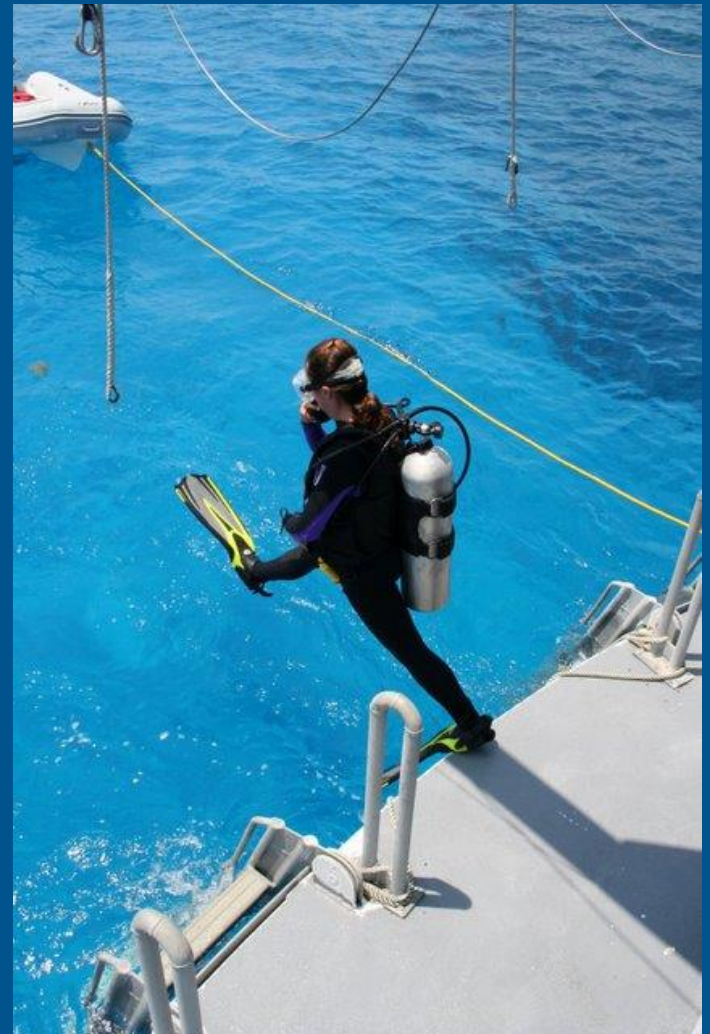
- Any charter operation with a dive or snorkel component to their business
- Certified operators agree to perform Blue Star briefings for all customers regardless of the specific trip that day
- Participation does not guarantee eligibility in the future



# **PROGRAM CRITERIA**

# Big Picture

- Owner agreement
- Blue Star contact at shop
- Initial staff training
- Initial evaluation
- Continuing education
- Standardized briefing
- Certification classes
- Conservation courses
- Conservation activities



# Standard Knowledge

- Staff take an online training course (~1 hr.)
- General FKNMS
- Sanctuary Zones
- Coral Reef Ecosystem
- Coral Reef Etiquette
- Maritime Heritage
- Invasive Lionfish



# On Board Briefing

- Topics from previous slide/online training
- What is Blue Star?
- “Learn more...” binder
- Personal flair

## BLUESTAR DIVE BRIEFING

*You are in a very special place - welcome to Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary.*



### What is FKNMS?

- Part of a national program to protect unique marine resources
- All waters surrounding the Keys, from Miami through the Tortugas
- Created by Congress to protect North America's only living barrier coral reef

### The Coral Reef Ecosystem: It may look like rock, but coral is alive and delicate.

- Made up of living organisms; colonies of tiny animals which create hard exoskeletons to protect soft, anemone-like bodies
- Home to 25 percent of all marine fish species
- Fragile and slow-growing, taking hundreds and even thousands of years to build

### Sanctuary Zones: What type of zone are you in? What are its rules and regulations?

- FKNMS is divided into types of “zones” that determine what activities are, or are not, allowed
- Some zones separate different user activities, such as fishing and diving
- Other zones are for research only, or preserve large spawning and nursery areas

### Special Rules: Violation of these regulations may result in fines and penalties.

- DO NOT:**
- touch, injure, remove, or possess any coral, includes soft corals, sea fans;
  - throw anything overboard (including food waste); or
  - remove or alter underwater cultural resources (i.e., items from shipwrecks).

### Reef and Fish Etiquette: Avoid contact with the reef; do not touch or harass marine life.

- Maintain proper buoyancy through practice and proper weight
- Even a minor brush with hands or fins can damage delicate coral animals
- Make sure no equipment is dangling or coming in contact with the reef (secure gauges, octos, cameras, etc.)
- Touching, handling, feeding, or riding any marine life stresses the animal and can interrupt feeding or mating or provoke aggressive behavior
- Avoid shallow areas of the reef to reduce the chance of injury to yourself or to coral
- Snorkelers: Try to stay horizontal in the water while keeping your head in the water and looking slightly forward; use snorkel vest or other floatation and lie on back looking up when necessary for rest or equipment adjustment

### Where Can I Learn More about this Special Place?

Pick up brochures located back at our shop, or talk with any member of the crew.



# Use Moorings (When Available)

- Proper use of moorings is important for the large vessels used by dive shops
- Anchoring allowed in accordance with Sanctuary regulations  
(15 CFR 922.163(a)(5)(ii))



Nancy Diersing, Florida Keys NMS

# Comply with All Laws and Marine Regulations

- Keep trash on board
- No collecting or harvesting from SPAs
- Oily bilge discharge
- Fish feeding
- Wildlife harassment
- Dive flag
- And more!

# Conservation Courses and Activities

- Incorporate Blue Star Reef Etiquette video into certification classes
- Provide the opportunity to earn at least one conservation related specialty certification
- Offer at least one conservation related special activity (reef cleanup, lionfish safari, CRF out planting, etc)

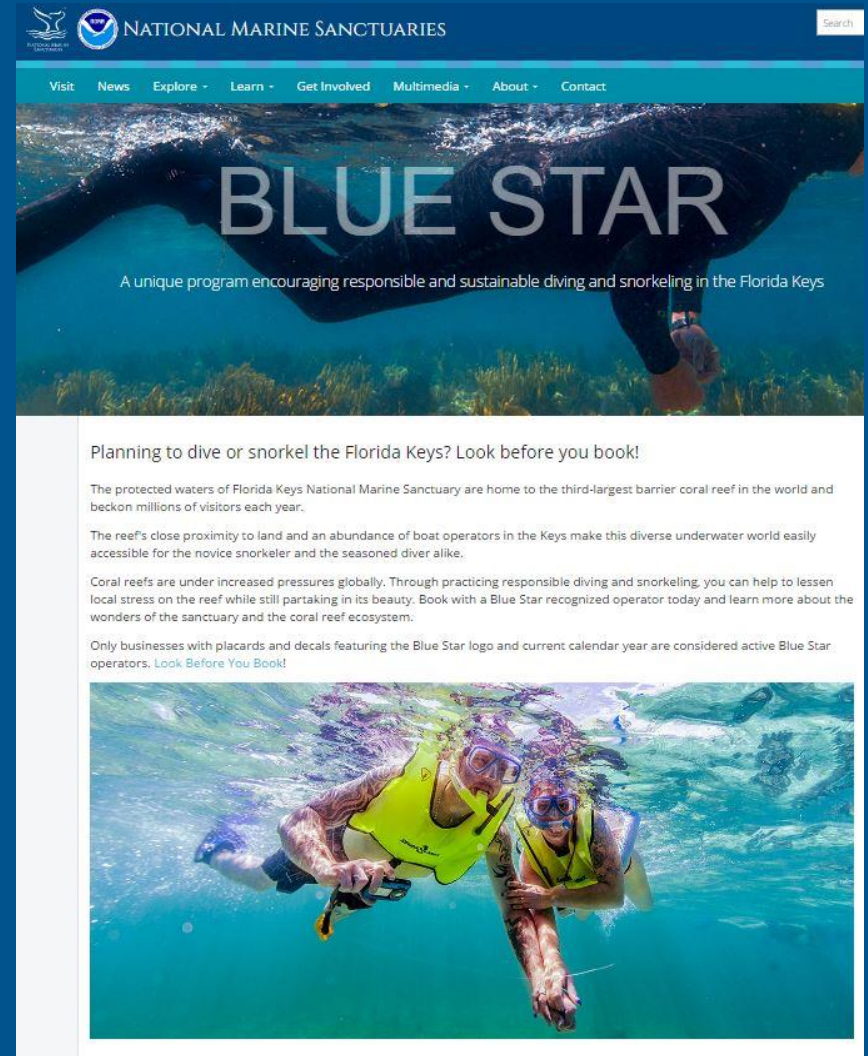
# Blue Star Program Promotion

- FKNMS educational materials/brochures in store (or offer on vessel)
- Blue Star sticker or plaque on vessel
- Blue Star sticker or plaque in shop or storefront
- Blue Star logo and link on website



# Blue Star Shop Promotion

- Press Releases
- Maintain a Blue Star website listing current recognized shops
- Promotional materials
- Website
- Radio spots
- Monroe County TDC
- Outreach events
- Related publications



# Staff Continuing Education

- Complete an annual online refresher training
  - Updated Modules
  - New Material
- Attend at least one marine conservation lecture or presentation each year
  - Lionfish workshop
  - Pennekamp/FIU/FKNMS/FKCC lecture series

# Environmental Regulations

- Recycle engine oil
  - Recycling everything else is encouraged
- Documented vessel pump out process

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## Marine Sanitation Device Discharge Regulations

**Effective:** December 27, 2010

**Activities prohibited Sanctuary-Wide:**

- ☐ Discharge of sewage incidental to vessel use and generated by a marine sanitation device in accordance with the Federal Water Pollution Control Act.
- ☐ Having a marine sanitation device that is not secured in a manner that prevents discharges or deposits of treated and untreated sewage. Acceptable methods include, but are not limited to, all methods that have been approved by the U.S. Coast Guard.

**Note:** Vessel sewage discharge has been prohibited in state waters of the sanctuary since its designation as a No Discharge Zone by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in 2002. However, now all sanctuary waters – including both state and federal waters – are protected from potentially harmful vessel sewage discharge. Pump-out facilities are located throughout the Keys to assist boat operators in complying with this rule.



□ = Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary Boundary

# PROCESS FOR PARTICIPATION

# Taking Ownership

- Completely voluntary program
- Needs shop buy in to succeed
- Owners must be interested and motivated
- Provided with checklist and operator agreement
- FKNMS invests time when initial requirements are met

# Evaluation

- Blue Star coordinator evaluates each shop based on the published criteria in the Blue Star Framework found online
- Results provided quickly
- Corrections rectified and verified if necessary



# Ride Along



# Annual Evaluation

- Once a shop is participating, it must complete an annual evaluation consisting of
  - Refresher training
  - Continuing education
  - Prearranged ride along from a Blue Star representative



**RECOGNITION**



## FLORIDA KEYS NATIONAL MARINE SANCTUARY

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### Namasté Eco-Excursions of Key West earns sanctuary Blue Star certification

October 17, 2016

NOAA's Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary welcomes Namasté Eco-Excursions of Key West, Florida as the newest participant in the Sanctuary's Blue Star education and conservation program.

The [Blue Star program](#), which recognizes companies that commit to training snorkelers and divers in low impact practices, has grown to about 20 operators since its inception in 2009. Research has shown that education can lessen the impact that snorkelers and divers have on marine ecosystems, because they are more careful to avoid damaging contact with corals and other marine life.

Namasté Eco-Excursions specializes in ecologically focused small group excursions. Staff proudly conduct 30-minute pre-snorkel educational briefings focused on coral reef ecology and reef etiquette. In addition, each group snorkels with at least one professional guide for the duration of their time in the water.

As retired school teachers, dykes Jeff Bowman and Trish Pleasant, along with Captain Justin Pasca, take great pride in teaching their guests about how they can help conserve the coral reef, and are passionate about fostering a connection and appreciation of the ocean environment.

When it comes to sustainable tourism, Namasté practices what they preach: their motor vessel uses an average of 30% bio-diesel to power its engine, and uses solar panels to charge their batteries so that it is not necessary to plug in to shore power at the dock.

The sanctuary is home to the third-largest living barrier coral reef in the world, and is visited by hundreds of thousands of snorkelers and divers each year. This contributes to an estimated \$2 billion in annual ocean-based tourism revenue. The reef's close proximity to land and an abundance of boat operators in the Keys make it easily accessible to both novice snorkelers and seasoned divers.

Operators become Blue Star certified by attending annual training on issues affecting coral reefs, sanctuary regulations and coral reef etiquette. In turn, Blue Star operators educate their customers by incorporating the information into certification classes and dive briefings. They also must offer conservation-related dive courses and participate in activities such as fish counts and reef clean-ups. Operators are re-evaluated on an annual basis.

Visit [www.floridakeys.noaa.gov/onthewater/bluestar.html](http://www.floridakeys.noaa.gov/onthewater/bluestar.html) for more information on the program and a list of recognized operators.

Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary protects 2,900 square nautical miles of critical marine habitat, including coral reef, hard bottom, sea grass meadows, mangrove communities and sand flats, as well as shipwrecks and maritime heritage resources. NOAA and the state of Florida manage the sanctuary. Visit us at <http://floridakeys.noaa.gov>. Find us on [Facebook](#) and follow us on [Twitter](#).

NOAA's mission is to understand and predict changes in the Earth's environment, from the depths of the ocean to the surface of the sun, and to conserve and manage our coastal and marine resources. Join NOAA on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and our other [social media channels](#).

#### Media Contact:

[Log Szymanski](#)

[305-534-9376](#)

[Links:](#)

[Blue Star Program](#)



Namasté's co-owner, Jeff Bowman, showing the spout of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary to customers on a recent reef excursion.

[Click for high-resolution version.](#)

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Search:

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# Other Promotions

## JOHN PENNEKAMP CORAL REEF STATE PARK

102601 Overseas Highway, Mile Marker 102.5, Key Largo, FL 33037

(305) 451-6300 E-mail Website

KADO Member Blue Star Operator Facebook

Come explore the spectacular living reefs of the Florida Keys & experience diving amidst the extraordinary wildlife! We offer separate diving & snorkeling tours. Equipment rental is available or bring your own. Visit our site for pricing & discounts!



## RAINBOW REEF DIVE CENTER

100800 Overseas Hwy, Key Largo, FL 33037 (305) 451-7171 E-mail Website

KADO Member Blue Star Operator

Dive & Snorkel Pennekamp State Park & the National Marine Sanctuary. 3 Custom Dive boats. FREE Dive guides on all Reef, Wreck, Drift & Night dive trips. As a PADI 5-star Career Development Center we offer instruction from beginner to Instructor levels.



## SEA DWELLERS DIVE CENTER OF KEY LARGO INC.

MM100 Overseas Highway, Key Largo, FL 33037 (800) 451-3640 E-mail Website

KADO Member Blue Star Operator

PADI 5-STAR GOLD PALM RESORT. Complete vacation packages including room at the Holiday Inn Key Largo Resort, continental breakfast plus a daily 2-location dive trip to Pennekamp Park and Key Largo Marine Sanctuary. Boats are just steps from your room!

## AMY SLATE'S AMORAY DIVE CENTER

104250 OVERSEAS HIGHWAY, KEY LARGO, FL 33037 1-800-426-6729 E-mail Website

KADO Member Blue Star Operator

Daily dive/snorkel trips to Pennekamp Park. See coral reefs & wrecks, Christ Statue, Duane, Spiegel & more. Deluxe catamaran & six-pack dive boats, scuba instruction, kids programs & u/w & sunset weddings. Onsite resort if you like to stay where you dive!

## CONCH REPUBLIC DIVERS

90800 Overseas Hwy., Tavernier, FL 33070 (800) 274-DIVE E-mail Website

KADO Member Blue Star Operator

We dive the reefs and wrecks from Spiegel Grove, off Key Largo, to the Eagle, just south of Islamorada. Come see why we're not just another dive shop, but the "FRIENDLIEST DIVE SHOP IN THE KEYS". Diving the Keys for 20 years.

BOOK NOW!

f NOAA Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary



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NOAA Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary

October 18, 2016

Congratulations to Rainbow Reef Dive Center on becoming our newest Blue Star operator. If you are diving in the Florida Keys remember to book a Blue Star operator- <http://floridakeys.noaa.gov/onthewater/bluestar.html>



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Taylor Hunt, Lars Vihlen and 67 others

2 shares



Write a comment...



## BLUE STAR OPERATOR

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's  
**FLORIDA KEYS NATIONAL MARINE SANCTUARY**  
recognizes this operator as demonstrating care and concern  
for Florida's coral reefs through the promotion of responsible diving and snorkeling  
practices and coral reef conservation.



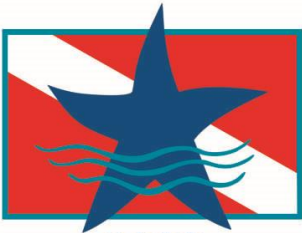
2009



## Blue Star Operator



Committed to Coral Conservation



2009

2010  
2011  
2012  
2013  
2014  
2015

Planning to Dive or Snorkel  
the Florida Keys?  
*Look before you book!*



Ask if your operator is  
**BLUE STAR** recognized



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<http://floridakeys.noaa.gov>



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